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## ZURVANISM AGAIN

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THE scholar concerned with the pre-Islamic religious history of Iran is beset with many difficulties, not the least of which is the great paucity of native sources. Consequently, he frequently must have recourse to India for parallels in the early period, and to Classical, Syriac and Armenian sources for much of his material in Parthian and Sassanian times. Furthermore, the temptation to import whole patterns of religious thought from neighboring religions, and to interpret earlier information from conditions obtaining in Iran at later periods of its history, is at times very strong indeed. With the fragmentary, often contradictory, data about Iranian religions at hand, there is also a tendency to fill in the blanks, and by so doing to create a finished and consistent whole picture of the pre-Islamic religions of Iran. It may be commendable to have a large canvas with bold, sweeping strokes, but when the details are so uncertain one may be understandably cautious in accepting the theories of even such eminent scholars as Herzfeld, Nyberg, and others.

It is not my intention here to survey the work of the Uppsala "school" or the Dumézil "school" in ancient Iranian religions, but before proceeding, one might note a certain *caveat* in regard to both. Given the state of our knowledge mentioned above, it is perhaps too easy in the Iranian field to impose theories or systems of religious speculation on the sparse data and to exclude or disregard information which does not fit, as either belonging to aberrant forms of orthodoxy or to various cults, whose number, incidentally, is ever growing. Granted that the situation was complex and that there probably did exist heresies and special cults, nonetheless to assume from several words, or special usage in rare

texts, the existence of a flourishing sect or school of thought is methodologically dangerous. I feel that Iranian history before the Sassanians is in somewhat the position of the history of Arabia before Muḥammad. In both cases local inscriptions on stone, coins, papyri, and the like, plus archeological discoveries, must be ranked higher than hitherto in assessing the past, including the history of religions. It is in this light, rather than with a phenomenological framework of religion, that I wish to examine briefly several aspects of Sassanian Zurvanism.

#### ZURVANISM UNDER THE SASSANIANS

Since the appearance of Zaehner's magistral book on Zurvanism there have been a series of articles or reviews showing the catalytic effect of the tome on scholars in the Iranian field, many of whom were already concerned with this problem. For Zurvanism does represent a problem in the history of the Zoroastrian church, and Iranists have long been studying it. One of the most important historical problems about Zurvanism has been restated recently by J. Duchesne-Guillemin in a review article on Zaehner's book.<sup>1</sup> In broad outline the problem is the discrepancy between the Pahlavi religious books which have survived and the accounts of the religion of Iran given by foreign sources, primarily Greek, Syriac, and Armenian. The former are representative of orthodox Zoroastrianism, with a few exceptions such as the book of Zāt-spram which show Zurvanite tendencies,<sup>2</sup> while the latter sources, on the whole, speak of Zurvanism. As Duchesne-Guillemin has briefly remarked, there are three proposals to explain the discrepancy; one, championed by Christensen, that the Sassanian religion was Zurvanism which was destroyed by a dualistic reaction in Zoroastrianism after the Muslim conquest. Another proposal was that Zurvanism represented a tendency or only a philosophical movement in Zoroastrianism and could never be considered apart from the official state church. The third proposal, the "middle road" of von Wesendonk and Zaehner, has it that a Toynbeeian rhythm of history can be followed in Sassanian re-

<sup>1</sup> J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Notes on Zervanism," *JNES*, 15 (1956), 108-112.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Tavadia, *Die Mittelpersische Sprache und Literatur der Zarathustrier* (Leipzig, 1956), 83-86.

ligious developments. Under the early Sassanian kings, the orthodox had to fight against "Zandīks or Dahrīs, Zurvanite materialists who maintained that the world was eternal in the sense that it developed out of Infinite Time, and who thereby denied the existence of a Creator-God, of rewards and punishments, and of heaven and hell."<sup>3</sup> But Zurvanism, or rather Zurvanite fatalism, prevailed and Ādurbāδ, son of Mahraspand, during the reign of Shāpūr II (309-379) had to reassert Zoroastrian orthodoxy. Under Khusrau I (531-579) the Mazdakites *and* the "modified Zurvanism of Mihr-Narsē and his son, Zurvāndāδ," had to be conquered. This last heresy Zaehner takes to be "the doctrine that Ohrmazd and Ahriman were the sons of the Infinite Zurvān."<sup>4</sup> We will proceed to another possibility in explaining the above mentioned discrepancy in the sources after a brief critique of each of the three views propounded above.

The suggestion of Christensen has much to commend it, and many scholars have rallied to it. In support of it, the Zurvanism of Mihr-Narsē and his son appears convincing, and the Zurvanism of the opponents of the Christian martyrs is also attested.<sup>5</sup> Since there is little evidence to suggest that the Sassanian kings were *not* Zurvanites, then it would seem "that Zurvanism was the royal religion throughout the period" of Sassanian rule.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to this theory, one may wonder at the rarity of names composed with Zurvan, as compared with names having as a part either Mithra or Ohrmizd. The coins of the Sassanian kings and their inscriptions bear no trace of Zurvanism. Although this, as the former, is the *argumentum ex silentio*, it nonetheless must be of some weight, especially as the coins carry the legend *mazdayasna* — "(Ahura) Mazda worshipper." It is difficult to deny the existence of either Zurvanism or "orthodox" Mazdaism under the Sassanians, but where Christensen's theory falters is in his assumption of a complete change to orthodoxy after the Muslim conquest to the exclusion of Zurvanism. For all scholars agree that the religion of the Pahlavi books of the ninth century A.D., and the

<sup>3</sup> R. Zaehner, "Postscript to Zurvān," BSOAS, 17 (1955), 236.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Accepted by M. Boyce, "Some Reflections on Zurvanism," BSOAS, 19 (1957), 305-306.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 308.

prevailing form of religion in Iran, among the non-Muslims, was "orthodox" Mazdaism. Dr. Boyce has undertaken to defend this weakness of Christensen in her above-cited article.

She suggests that the regionalism of "the two branches of Zoroastrianism" may explain the post-Islamic situation.

The Manichaean evidence suggests that in the third century Zurvanism was dominant in the south-west of the Empire, Mazdeism among the Parthians. This gives support to what is an inherent probability, namely that orthodox Zoroastrianism remained strongest in those regions nearest Zoroaster's homeland, and farthest from Babylonian and Greek influences, i.e. in northern and eastern Iran. These regions being remote also from the foreign observers of Sasanian times, it is not surprising that they should have been screened from their notice by the Zurvanites of the west. At the Muslim conquest their position enabled these areas to hold out longest, and to remain the strongholds of the old religion. It would be natural, therefore, for their priests gradually to acquire a new authority over the decimated church, an authority which would in itself, in my opinion, account for a change of doctrine as expressed in official expositions of the faith. It is hardly surprising, however, if in these there was a failure wholly to obliterate the Zurvanite doctrines so long established and powerfully supported. That Zurvanism continued for centuries among groups of 'common persons' is suggested by a passage in Mas'udi.<sup>7</sup>

This view is difficult to accept for the following reasons: 1) If Zurvanism was popular at court, this was surely in the west of the empire, not in the east. 2) The east *did not remain* the stronghold of orthodox Zoroastrianism after the Islamic conquest. Quite the contrary; it was Fārs province which was the center of orthodoxy, and it was in Fārs (or in Baghdād) that the orthodox Pahlavi books were written.<sup>8</sup> 3) Zoroastrians remained strong in the west, in Yazd and Kirman, down to the present day, *not* in the east of Iran, where geographical conditions were even more favorable for preservation of minority religions. These Western Zoroastrians were orthodox, as far as can be determined.<sup>9</sup> 4) The use

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 308-309.

<sup>8</sup> This is not only proved by the books themselves; cf. E. West in *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie* II, 91, 100, 103, etc., but also by Muslim writers; cf. B. Spuler, *Iran in früh-islamischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1952), 191-192. Compare *Die Vita des Scheich Abū Ishāq al-Kāzarūnī*, ed. F. Meier (Leipzig, 1948), 20-21, 40.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. the *Škand-Gumānik Vičār* ed. P. J. de Menasce (Fribourg, 1945).

of the word Zurvan for Brahma in Sogdian Buddhist texts, and the god Zūn in Zabulistan, is matched by the absence of Zurvanite theophoric names on the Parthian ostraca of Nisa or on the Kushan and Hephthalite coins.<sup>10</sup> Still I would place more weight on the occurrences than on absences. 5) The post-Islamic revolts, in *Khurasan and Transoxiana* (Bihafrid, Khurramdīn, Muqanna', etc.) were *not* uprisings of orthodox Zoroastrians (indeed the latter supported the Muslims against their own heretics), and they were hardly Zurvanite inspired, although one might conceivably find some connections in doctrines. These revolts, as far as religious ideas are concerned, were rather syncretic, which is what one would expect in eastern Iran.<sup>11</sup>

In short there seems to me no evidence of a geographical distribution of orthodox Mazdaism as opposed to Zurvanism. So the theory of Christensen that Zurvanism was *the* religion of the Sassanians, which after the Islamic conquest changed to orthodox Mazdaism, would seem to require revision.

The second proposal suggests that Zurvanism was only a philosophical movement or tendency in Zoroastrianism and never represented a separate religion.<sup>12</sup> Arguments in favor of this view have been brought forward by Duchesne-Guillemin.<sup>13</sup> This view has much to commend it, for we do not have any evidence that Zurvanism ever had separate rites, a special priesthood, and different places of worship or gathering, from the "orthodox" followers of Ahura Mazda. On the other hand we are confronted with a wider problem here. What distinguishes a religion, a sect, or a religious tendency or movement in the Sassanian period of history? Is the answer to be given in terms of orthodoxy or orthopraxy? If belief is essential how can one reconcile the Zurvanite position on the nature of the godhead with "orthodox" Mazdaism? The answer is that one cannot; in terms of basic belief Zurvanism

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the Vessantara Jātaka, E. Benveniste (Paris, 1946), in the glossary under 'zrw'. For the Nisa inscriptions the oral communication of I. M. Djakonov at the 24th International Congress of Orientalists at Munich, September 1957, was far more complete than previous publications. Cf. also O. von Wesendonk, *Das Weltbild der Iranier* (Munich, 1933), 266-267.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. G. Sadighi, *Les mouvements religieux Iraniens* (Paris, 1938), 123, 167, 197.

<sup>12</sup> I use here Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism as synonyms.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. his "Notes on Zervanism," *JNES*, 15 (1956), 108-109, his *Ormazd et Ahriman* (Paris, 1953), 132-133.

and Mazdaism must be two religions. But in terms of rites and practice they were one. The Mazdakites, as far as we can tell, did not hold any theological or philosophocal beliefs radically different from most Zoroastrians.<sup>13a</sup> But they did have different social beliefs and practices, hence they were heretics deserving of death. Zurvanites, on the other hand, held basic religious beliefs, or so it would seem, incompatible with "orthodox" Mazdaism. But they, as far as we know, held the same social beliefs and ritual practices as the "orthodox" Zoroastrians, hence they were not treated as heretics as were the Mazdakites.

After the Islamic conquest, however, the social order changed and non-Muslims did not participate socially in the ruling Muslim community. Hence doctrine became more important than practice and Zurvanites became heretics, members of a sect. So the Muslim authors of the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D., such as Shahrīstānī and al-Baghdādī, were not misled or misinformed.<sup>14</sup> Zurvanism was a sect of the *Majūs* (Zoroastrians) at that time, just as it was not in Sassanian times.

Whether, in the Sassanian period Zurvanism was anything more than a philosophical movement or tendency cannot be demonstrated. Whether it was mixed somehow with other beliefs, indeed other religions, is also uncertain though not improbable. The occurrence of the names Zūn and 'zrw' in the East Iranian *Kulturkreis* would indicate some Zurvanite relations, but there is not enough evidence at hand to make any valid conclusions. As the matter now stands, until fresh evidence appears, I prefer to adhere to this interpretation of Zurvanism. There is, however, another proposal which should be heard.

The third proposal, "the royal highway to the solution of the riddle," as Duchesne-Guillemin puts it,<sup>15</sup> has been set forth by Zaehner, and seemingly accepted by Duchesne-Guillemin (p. 109 of article cited). Dr. Boyce has criticized this view,<sup>16</sup> and I would like to add that the testimony of the coins (albeit poor sources

<sup>13a</sup> Cf. O. Klima, *Mazdak, Geschichte einer sozialen Bewegung im sassanidischen Persien* (Prague, 1957). Naturally the sides were not so clearly drawn as presented here, but the basic argument holds.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Shahrīstānī in Zaehner's book, 433; Mas'ūdī, *ibid.*, 443.

<sup>15</sup> "Notes on Zervanism," *op. cit.*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, 306-308.

for the history of religions) does not suggest any rhythm or changes in the official state religion *as outwardly professed*. One may raise the question of Mazdak, but I fail to find a fundamental *religious* change in that period, as would be the case with the beliefs of Zurvanism. Mazdak, after all, threatened the social order. Before continuing, however, the theories of the Uppsala school should be mentioned.

Widengren has led the Uppsala school in writing about Zurvan. According to his latest work on the subject,<sup>17</sup> he maintains that Zurvan, the West Iranian "*Hochgott*," is very old (p. 7), and that this old Zurvanism had a real cult of Ahriman (p. 15). The book *Artā Virāz nāme* gives us the eschatology of the Zurvanite warrior circle of Vayu (p. 22). The Magi, the priestly caste of the Median kingdom, were the promoters of Zurvanism, which is nothing more than the pre-Zoroastrian Old Median religion with some additions (pp. 55, 102). The Zurvanite apocalyptic literature is the basis for much of the later gnosis in Manichaeism (p. 31). Zurvanism continued in northwest Iran during Parthian times, and this is where Mani obtained many of his ideas (p. 61). In Anatolia a folk religion, or "*Proteusartigen Zervanismus*" gave certain elements to the Mithra and Anahita cults (p. 62).

Widengren continues to amass evidence for an old and important Zurvanite religion by calling attention to the seemingly theophoric names in Nuzi tablets with Zurvan in them (p. 105). He asserts that the old Persian calendar of Cappadocia was Zurvanite inspired (p. 107). Furthermore, Mithraism developed from Zurvanism, the folk religion of northern Iran (pp. 115, 120), and Iranian influences on Judaism came from the Zurvanite folk religion through Mithraism (p. 133). He reasserts the closeness of Zurvanism and gnosticism (p. 135), and finally proposes that Ardashīr brought the *mobads* of the north together with the *herbads* of the south, with the result that the former won the upper hand and dominated Iran in the Sassanian period (pp. 140-144).

In criticism of this may I first say there is no conclusive evidence for any of this; all is *höchst spekulativisch*. The Nuzi names, which are subject to different readings, cannot be used as

<sup>17</sup> All page citations are from the offprint of his "Stand und Aufgaben der iranischen Religionsgeschichte," *Numen* (1955).

proof for anything, and the calendar can hardly be called Zurvanite. As for the rest we simply do not know.

As is usually the case all of these theories contain truths, and if we had enough source material we might be able to erect a reasonable structure of what actually existed in Sassanian times. As it is we have fragments and surmises, based upon rumours, and we are obliged to imagine a large pattern into which the various fragments of information can best fit. Such a pattern or theory will be only a working hypothesis, subject to ready change or even discard as new material is brought to bear on the problem.

Speculation on time is probably age old. We find early evidence of Chronos speculation in Greece and traces of concern with time in the Avesta and among the astrologers of Babylonia. On general aspects of time speculation one can hardly speak of major influences one way or the other. Just as the Iranian influences on Greek thought proposed by Goetze have been effectively refuted by Duchesne-Guillemin,<sup>18</sup> in my opinion, so Iranian influences on the Qumran community, and the Iranian origin of the *Erlösungsmysterium* and the *Lehre des vollkommenen Menschen*, must be largely discounted.<sup>19</sup> If we speak of "popular" Zurvanism, as a sect like Mithraism with cult, then its roots would probably be found in Mesopotamia in pre-Achaemenid times, having its spread on the Iranian plateau under the world empire of the Achaemenids. If we presume Babylonian (and later Greek) influences on Iran, how did they actually, physically occur? Surely it was through Persian officials or soldiers of the Great Kings stationed in various centers of the empire, or through Mesopotamian merchants. But it must be emphasized that there is no proof of a Zurvanite religion with a cult or a church.

Yet Zurvanism as we know it in Iran is a pessimistic belief, hardly one to spread widely. Like gnosticism it was hardly a popular belief. This kind of time speculation, bereft of myth and cult, is an intellectual or upper class predilection. It represents the thought of sophisticated people rather than of peasants or craftsmen, and Duchesne-Guillemin's statement that the orthodox

<sup>18</sup> Cf. his "Persische Weisheit in Griechischem Gewande?," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 49 (1956), 115-122.

<sup>19</sup> H. C. Puech in F. L. Cross, *The Jung Codex* (London, 1955), 76-77.



Zoroastrians had to take account of Zurvanism because it became too popular to be ignored,<sup>20</sup> if accepted should be qualified by popular in court circles, or among the aristocracy. Dr. Boyce's statement above (from Zaehner) that Zurvanism continued for centuries (after the Islamic conquest) among groups of "common persons" can be explained as a misinterpretation of Mas'ūdī, whose use of *'awāmm* is "laity" as opposed to the clergy, rather than "common persons," and is no proof of the masses holding to Zurvanism.

The foreign reports of Zoroastrianism would notice the Zurvanite features of the beliefs of those with whom the foreigners came in contact — state officials, including mobads and members of the court. This coincides with what we know of the "Zurvanism" among the Sassanian rulers. The Zurvanite rulers and aristocracy of Iran would not be likely to appear liberal to Christians in the empire who held the same faith as the enemies of Iran. Zurvanism then did not have a separate church, yet it may have been more than just a tendency. One can well imagine Zurvanite groups within the Zoroastrian church, especially at the court of the kings.

Why did Zurvanism fade away after the Muslim conquest? It was not because of geographical distribution. The decline and fall of Zurvanism, I think, must be linked with the decline and fall of the Sassanian dynasty and the ruling class. It was just this upper class, the court, the *dihqāns*, and some *mobads*, who converted to Islam to keep their power and to work with the conquerors, and who probably helped to bring into Islam time speculation and other problems so prominent under the 'Abbasids. But the Dahrīs in Islamic times are not Zurvanites unless all those who were concerned with fate and time under Islam are designated "Zurvanites." This, of course, is nonsense. The Muslim conquest really aided orthodox Zoroastrianism, the faith of the masses in Iran, with the features we know of among the Parsis today, to come to the fore and to dictate the future course of the religion of Ahura Mazda.<sup>21</sup> This is not to discount possible forms "material

<sup>20</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin in "Notes," op. cit., III.

<sup>21</sup> By "to the fore" I mean "to the attention of outside sources"; rather one should say, "Zurvanism dropped out of the picture."

and ethical" of Zurvanism, but neither would qualify as a religion of the masses.

One must be mindful of the historical circumstances and I think the hypothesis proposed above better fits into the history of Iran than the others. To recapitulate: in Sassanian times we had the official state church, which was an intensely nationalistic one, throughout the whole period. The upper classes and court were partial to Zurvanite beliefs while the masses, on the whole, held to "orthodox Zoroastrianism," with many polytheistic traces from past ages as well as later accretions. There must have been heresies within the church, engendered by contacts with Manichaeans, Christians, or other foreign faiths, as well as purely internal movements. The division within the Sassanian church did not lead to civil or religious wars with the dominance of one, then the other party, but obviously there were strains and tensions within the Iranian national church. To foreigners, however, this must have been much less than the division between orthodox and monophysites in the Byzantine Empire of the sixth century A.D. The Persians, when they fought both monophysites and orthodox in the Byzantine armies, can hardly have cared about the difference among their enemies.

Whether the Zurvanism of the Sassanian court represented the so-called "Istakhr tradition" of the *herbads*, while what came to be known as "orthodox Mazdaism" represented the tradition of the *mobads* of *Shīz* (Ganzak), I cannot say. After the Arab conquest, as one might expect, the "folk" religion of Mazdaism prevailed over that of the court and aristocracy.

It must be stressed again that religion in Iran in the Sassanian period (not to mention other times and places) was far more practices- and rites-centered than it was belief-centered. More than anything else religion meant a way of life, a certain society with its forms and rites. Anyone who reads the Pahlavi books can see the excessive concern for ritual, prohibitions and the like in daily life. This was important for the state church of Sassanian times, not philosophical speculation. Mazdakism represented a threat to the church (and state) not Zurvanism. Perhaps we should rid ourselves of all -isms, including a concept of "Zoroastrianism" when speaking of the religious situation in Sassanian Iran. As

with many Iranian philological problems, one may perhaps say of religious problems in Iran, *non liquet*.

In conclusion, I feel that the separate existence of a Zurvanite religion and church is more the creation of European scholars than a true picture of what existed in Sassanian times. Zurvanism then is a Zoroastrian dilemma, but not more, probably less, than the Mu'tazilites with free will and predestination in Islam, or "time" speculation of some of the Church Fathers.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> After writing this in the autumn of 1957 I had the opportunity of discussing some of the problems of this paper with colleagues in Germany. Although some of the statements above might be modified I am convinced the thesis is correct. More material on the fate of the *dihqāns* and *mobads* in Islamic times will be found in my article "Irans kulturelle Wiedergeburt um die Jahrtausendwende," in a forthcoming issue of *Der Islam*.